

New Hiker FAQ

Note: During the Covid-19 period, all procedures may be supplemented or replaced by local and AMC COVID guidelines.

Welcome to the Appalachian Mountain Club (AMC)! This FAQ page is intended for new members who are not sure how to choose a hike to match their ability level, register for a hike, or what to bring for a day in the outdoors. The Southeastern Massachusetts (SEM) chapter organizes hikes year round, so it is important for new hikers to be honest in their self-assessment to maximize their safety and enjoyment as well as the safety and enjoyment of the other hikers in the group. Below you will find description codes that will help you choose, prepare for, and equip yourself for a hike that matches your strength and stamina. Also please feel free to contact the hike leaders indicated for any in which you are interested to discuss further.

Who may participate on an AMC hike?

All SEM hike participants must be physically able to participate in the activity described and be equipped with appropriate clothing, gear, and supplies appropriate for the activity. AMC membership is not required, but encouraged.

How can I decide which hike would be best for me?

Activity Difficulty Ratings:

The Appalachian Mountain Club activities are rated using a scale of six levels described below. Consult the participant information or trip posting for details including the intended group pace and equipment requirements. Refer to the tables that follow the general descriptions for the miles, speed and, when applicable, elevation gain. Note that any individual activity may be rated higher by the leader than the tables indicate for several reasons, such as a short distance but very difficult conditions (terrain, steepness, or exposure) or a much longer distance over easier terrain. Activities may also be rated lower at the leader's discretion if instruction in the activity discipline is among the objectives of the program. Some direct experience in the trip activity is required for vigorous and strenuous levels, especially if there are technical skills needed for the activity. This experience threshold may be met at the leader's discretion for hiking and backpacking programs if the participant is able to provide examples of recent similar experience and adequate fitness to participate in a group activity.

1. **Accessible:** Suitable for stroller, wheelchair, or other wheel assisted travel. Paved, hardened gravel, or ADA listed terrain or approach. The distance traveled and anticipated timing of the activity are detailed in the activity description. This rating is employed across activities and is not broken out in each of the tables below. Please direct any inquiries for reasonable accommodation to the trip leader in advance of the trip.
2. **Relaxed:** Suitable for most active participants with full mobility and participants new to the activity described. Expect to be actively on the move for about 3 hours/day. You may be on the trail, slopes or water for a longer time, but there will be plenty of rest breaks.
3. **Easy:** Reasonable fitness for the expected activity is needed, but the trip is designed for those new to the activity. Expect to be active up to 4 hours/day. A bit more active time than the relaxed rating, but with generous breaks.
4. **Moderate:** Fitness level and/or past experience to sustain the activity at a moderate pace is required. Expect to be active up to 4-6 hours per day. Reasonable breaks in the action.

5. **Vigorous:** Suitable for those with recent similar experience and/or demonstrated proficiency, such as being active in sports or often (regular) engagement in vigorous physical activity. Ability to perform at the expected level for back-to-back days for multi-day trips. Expect to be active up to 5-6 hours per day, with brief breaks.
6. **Strenuous:** Most physically demanding. Fitness for the specific activity is required with direct experience in the activity highly recommended and potentially mandatory (see the activity description). Expect to be active 6+ hours per day for back-to-back days if it is a multi-day trip. Breaks will be shorter/fewer than for other levels of trips.

Hiking/Backpacking/Trekking

Activity Level	Moving Time (up to _ hours)	Distance (up to __ miles)	Daily Elevation Gain or Loss (up to __ feet)
Relaxed	3+	4	500
Easy	4	6	1000
Moderate	6	8	2000
Vigorous	6	12	3000
Strenuous	6+	15	3500+

Notes:

1. Trips involving hiking at high elevations, such as above 7000', may be rated more difficult than mileage and elevation gain alone would dictate.
2. Likewise, backpacking and trekking trips that involve carrying a heavy pack may be rated up a level.

If you are a new hiker, start with a slower, easier hike rather than a faster, more difficult one. Never choose a hike solely because of its location, no matter how appealing it may sound! It's a good idea to start with easier local hikes held in State Forests, State Parks, conservation areas, and the Blue Hills Reservation before heading up to the mountains of New Hampshire or out to the hills of Western Massachusetts. However, once you start getting into it, you'll be surprised how quickly you'll become ready (both physically and mentally) for more ambitious hikes "up North." Once again, you shouldn't be bashful about contacting the respective hike leaders to discuss.

Do I need to register for AMC hikes?

Hikes organized by the SEM Hiking Committee require participants to register in advance. After you register for a hike the leader may follow up with you and ask several questions to help you decide whether that particular hike is appropriate for you based on your prior hiking experience (if any), physical condition, and equipment. Please don't take it as a personal insult if the leader recommends a different hike that he or she feels might be appropriate (and enjoyable) for you. Also keep in mind that SEM hike leaders generally do not permit participants to bring their pets, other than service animals along on official chapter hikes and even then, you would require specific prior approval from the leader to do so. AMC does have service animal guidance which the leader would review with anyone seeking to bring a service animal on a hike.

Please note that hikes have a group size. If the trip status is “Wait Listed,” it means that the hike leaders have reached the maximum number of hikers for this trip and that there is now a waiting list for participation.

Where do I get driving directions to the meeting place?

Hike leaders will provide the location of the trailhead in the information sheet that they will email to you several days before the hike. Of course, it’s always a good idea to consult a road map, an online map site, and/or your GPS to review the directions before you leave for the trailhead. Except for during COVID, AMC strongly encourages carpooling when feasible, so the leaders will also often suggest one or two carpooling locations and encourage participants to communicate with each other in advance to maximize carpooling. Drivers should plan to arrive at the trailhead at least 15 minutes before the hike starts so you can don your boots and be ready to go when the group leader starts the hike.

What should I wear and what gear do I need to bring?

The “information sheet” will usually include detailed information on what to wear and what gear is required for that particular hike. In general, you’ll need:

- at least two liters of water in Nalgene-type water bottle or Camelback
- trail snacks and sandwich for lunch
- full rain/wind gear
- waterproofed, well-broken-in hiking boots
- gaiters (for hikes in winter or “mud season” and some hikers wear them as a barrier to ticks in the spring and summer)
- weather-appropriate synthetic or wool clothing, including warm fleece jacket or wool sweater (multiple light layers are better than a single heavy jacket or coat). No cotton jeans or sweatshirts
- warm wool, fleece, or nylon-shelled hat and gloves (mandatory in winter, and a good idea in the mountains any time of the year)
- hiking poles (recommended, but not mandatory)
- headlamp (required for some hikes)
- personal first aid kit, sunscreen, and insect repellent (during bug season)
- toilet paper and baggie
- trash bag
- whistle and compass (recommended for safety)
- pocket knife
- bandana
- foam pad for sitting during breaks (optional, but recommended)
- ID card
- Mylar “space blanket” for emergencies
- daypack to hold all the above

For winter hikes, the leaders may also require light traction devices (such as micro-spikes), full crampons, and/or snowshoes, plus additional clothing layers and an extra hat and gloves.

Many hike leaders will not allow individuals wearing jeans to join a hike. Cotton takes too long to dry, making it uncomfortable in warmer months, and actually dangerous when the thermometer drops (hence the often-repeated expression, “cotton kills.”) and jeans are not comfortable for hiking. When stopping for breaks, we cool down quickly and wet cotton clothes could cause hypothermia posing a risk not only to the hiker but to the group as well. Most hikers wear synthetic clothes, in layers, because they wick moisture away from the skin and dry quickly. You will also need a water resistant windbreaker with a hood in case of a sudden rainstorm. In cold weather, you’ll also need additional layers of fleece or wool (including a warm hat and gloves). Extra items in your backpack might include a fleece vest, a windbreaker, two or more extra pairs of gloves in case the first pair gets wet; an extra shirt to change into for the ride home, and always, an extra pair of hiking socks. A leader can refuse a hiker if he/she deems the hiker is not attired in a manner appropriate for the conditions.

How do I choose hiking boots that will be right for me?

The first step in choosing hiking boots is to determine what kind of hiking you’re most likely to be doing. Lightweight hiking shoes or boots are appropriate for local hikes on relative flat and smooth trails (think Borderland State Park); midweight hiking boots are more appropriate for more rugged Blue Hills or New Hampshire hikes. While, heavyweight hiking boots are usually best for multi-day backpacking trips, some diehards are willing to put up with their heavier weight and stiffness in exchange for the increased protection and support they provide. New hikers should probably choose midweight hiking boots, since these would also be appropriate as you progress to more challenging hikes. Please note that all heavyweight, most midweight, and even some lightweight hiking boots/shoes require adequate “breaking in” on the street before you hit the trails with them. You’ll know when the boot is properly broken in when you can walk for a half hour or so and not feel any discomfort, pressure points, or “hot spots” caused by friction.

Go to a retailer that offers well-known, quality hiking gear (EMS, REI, LL Bean, etc.) and knows how to properly fit you for your hiking boots. A good boot fitter will measure your feet and take note of any conditions, such as pronation, that might require a supportive footbed in order to get the best possible fit. Take along the socks you like to wear for hiking. Be patient, and if you don’t think the selection is broad enough, go to another store. Some stores that offer expert boot fitting will even take returns on boots that have been worn if the boot turns out to be a bad fit.

The boots should be snug at the heel but roomy enough for you to wiggle your toes. One way to test for a good fit is to move your foot forward in the unlaced boot so that your toes touch the front of the boot. There should be just enough room for your forefinger to fit between your heel and the back of the boot. If you are an in-between size, have the boots fitted to your larger foot and try using a more cushioned insert, or heavier sock, in the boot for your smaller foot. Sporting goods stores that cater to hikers will have a slanted ramp that you can walk up and down to test the boots for comfort when walking up and down hills.

How much food and water should I bring for a day hike?

Bring lunch (usually a sandwich or two), trail snacks (such as chocolate, a granola bar, and/or fresh or dried fruit), and a minimum two quarts of water (three quarts when the temperature is over 80 degrees). In cold weather, some hikers also bring a thermos of hot tea or soup. Never skimp on water; it’s your own responsibility to stay properly hydrated, which helps prevent fatigue,

cramping, heat stroke (in summer), and hypothermia (in winter). After you have hiked various distances in different weather conditions, you will have a better idea of how much water and food you need. You should always carry some extra food, such as high-energy bars, in case you experience a delay or if you feel hungry on the trip back home.

What are the roles of the leader and the co-leader?

It's the leader's responsibility to plan and organize the hike and to guide the group, from the designated meeting place until the time of departure. The leader's decisions about the route and group conduct are final. The assistant co-leader(s) is/are there to assist the leader, who may delegate certain roles to that person. AMC leaders are trained volunteers who want to provide an enjoyable day in the woods, so it is important to follow their guidance and observe all park regulations and club rules. Keep in mind that hiking involves a certain element of risk and that your personal safety is your responsibility, not the leader's, and that lack of preparation on your part can adversely impact the group as a whole.

What is the role of the sweep?

The official hike leader will designate someone to serve as a "sweep" before the hike begins. Hikers should remain behind the designated "leader" and in front of the "sweep" at all times during the hike to help ensure that no one gets lost or left behind. The official hike leader will also announce "separation breaks" every two hours or so during the hike in which male and female participants will move out of sight of each other to perform the needed bodily functions. If you need a separation break before the leader calls one, let the leader know. Never leave the group unannounced for a solo separation!

What if I want to go faster than the group or if I can't keep up?

It is best to remain with the group even if you feel that the pace is too slow. If you find that you cannot keep up with the group, it is best to let the leader know as early in the hike as possible, since he or she may have to assign another leader to walk you back to the trailhead. Never turn back on your own. If you do need to leave the group, the leader will note this on the list of participants for the activity. Also, on SEM hikes, if there are enough leaders, we'll often break a larger group into nominally "faster" and "slower" groups to accommodate different hiking speeds. Remember to read the hike descriptions carefully so you can choose a hike appropriate for your ability.

Can I use my cell phone on a hike?

Cell phone usage is not allowed except in the case of an emergency or special situation, in which case it should be used away from the group during a designated break and after you inform the leader so you don't get left behind by accident. Otherwise cell phones should be turned off during hikes.

Are there any special rules for hiking during the Coronavirus pandemic?

The Coronavirus has required AMC to make significant changes to the way we conduct our activities. The goal of AMC is always to conduct activities in a safe and sound manner. The virus has forced us to alter the way people register for hikes, the safety precautions each of us is responsible for and to limit the total number of participants (including leaders) in an event. It is important to understand that AMC guidance may change in response to changing conditions and/or

state and local mandates. Trip leaders are responsible for keeping current on conditions and providing updated information to activity participants. In addition, participants will have to complete a questionnaire when registering, carry (and possibly use) a face covering and maintain social distancing throughout the activity. Trip leaders will provide any additional information necessary.

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Original policy dated 4/29/13 by Paul Miller (Vice Hiking Chair)

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